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Bait and Switch

By BOB HERBERT

President Bush has learned how to deliver a moving speech. But Tuesday night's State of the Union Message did not address the most important question facing the American people: What kind of nation are we becoming?

The president spoke passionately about bringing "food and medicines and supplies and freedom" to the Iraqi people. But he is leading a hard-right administration here at home that is seriously eroding the economic security, the access to health care, the civil rights and civil liberties and the environmental protections of the American people.

The first part of the president's speech was crafted to create exactly the opposite impression. He promised an economy "that grows fast enough to employ every man and woman who seeks a job." He proposed a prescription drug benefit for some retirees. And he said he was ready to commit \$1.2 billion to research into environmentally friendly hydrogen-powered automobiles.

But those were largely bait-and-switch proposals. Despite rising unemployment, the president's plan for the economy was simply a continuation of his tax-cut mania. There was nothing in the way of a job-creation program or a real economic stimulus. And there was absolutely zero help offered to the states and local governments whose budgetary knees are buckling under the weight of their worst fiscal crisis since World War II.

The president's prescription drug benefit, tempting at first glance, is tied to a restructuring of Medicare that will curtail, not enhance, the delivery of health services to the elderly. It was designed to look like an act of compassion. It's not.

The hydrogen cars initiative was a particularly deft touch for a president who has been hammered for his environmental policies. Hydrogen-powered autos could make a difference in the long term, say 20 or 30 years from now, or more. But what is much more significant is that Mr. Bush has stood like a rock with the opponents of increased fuel efficiency for the cars we're driving right now. The payoff for immediately improving vehicle fuel economy would be huge. In addition to saving money for motorists, it would cut pollution, curtail our contribution to the greenhouse effect and reduce our dependence on foreign oil.

We heard nothing about that in the speech.

The Bush administration is changing the nation in fundamental ways. However one feels about a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, over the long term a bullying, go-it-alone foreign policy wedded to a military doctrine of pre-emption is a recipe for destabilization and paranoia around the world.

And despite its professed commitment to compassionate policies at home, the administration's

obsession with tax cuts is proving destructive on two fronts: It is draining the nation's coffers of money for social programs (including Medicare and Social Security), and blocking any real attempt to invest in a range of programs and infrastructure initiatives that are crucial to the nation's long-term future.

Some of those programs relate directly to domestic security.

These issues get short shrift in an atmosphere of imminent war. But I doubt that this is the kind of country most Americans want. And we are already beginning to pay the price. Local taxes are soaring and services are breaking down.

On the night of the president's speech, the governor of New Jersey, James McGreevey, announced that he would be cutting state aid to colleges and universities by 10 percent because of a \$5 billion state budget gap. In Connecticut, nearly 3,000 state workers have been laid off and Gov. John Rowland said another 1,000 needed to go.

In some states the public school week is being curtailed. In some, prisoners are being furloughed.

These are telling indications of the real state of the union.

As the most powerful nation on earth, and the world's only superpower, the United States has a particular obligation to use its might wisely abroad and to distribute its benefits fairly at home.

That is not an easy mission for a hard-right-wing administration, which is why the Bush administration puts such a premium on the rhetoric of compassion.

Behind the veil of rhetoric is a Darwinian political philosophy that, if clearly understood, would repel the majority of Americans.